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ABSTRACT

On average, leaders are engaged in one form or another of communication for about 70 percent of their waking moments. This digest provides suggestions for school leaders who want to increase the effectiveness of those interactions. A first step is to recognize that listening is the skill most essential to effective communication. Other skills of effective communicators include asking questions, giving constructive feedback, paraphrasing, checking perceptions, and describing behavior. "I statements" can be used to request changes in behavior in a nonthreatening way. Tips for improving nonverbal communication and for enhancing interpersonal relationships with colleagues and constituents are also offered. (Contains nine references.) (LMI)

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# Communication Skills

*Karen Irmsher*

On average, leaders are engaged in one form or another of communication for about 70 percent of their waking moments. This Digest provides suggestions for school leaders who want to increase the effectiveness of those interactions.

**What One Skill Is Most Essential for Effective Communication?**

"Seek first to understand, then to be understood," recommends Stephen Covey (1990). He, and many others, believe this precept is paramount in interpersonal relations. To interact effectively with anyone—teachers, students, community members, even family members—you need first to understand where the person is "coming from."

Next to physical survival, Covey observes, "the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival—to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated." When you listen carefully to another person, you give that person "psychological air." Once that vital need is met, you can then focus on influencing or problem-solving. The inverse is also true. School leaders who focus on communicating their own "rightness" become isolated and ineffectual, according to a compilation of studies by Karen Osterman (1993).

Good listeners don't interrupt, especially to correct mistakes or make points; don't judge; think before answering; face the speaker; are close enough to hear; watch nonverbal behavior; are aware of biases or values that distort what they hear; look for the feelings and basic assumptions underlying remarks; concentrate on what is being said; avoid rehearsing answers while the other person is talking; and don't insist on having the last word (Richard Gemmet 1977).

To master the art of listening, Gemmet advises developing the attitude of wanting to listen, then the skills to help express that attitude.

**What Are Some Other Skills of Effective Communicators?**

*Asking questions* is an excellent way to initiate communication because it shows other people that you're paying attention and interested in their response. Susan Glaser and Anthony Biglan (1977) suggest the following:

- ask open-ended questions
- ask focused questions that aren't too broad
- ask for additional details, examples, impressions

*Giving Feedback.* Several types of feedback—praise, paraphrasing, perception-checking, describing behavior, and "I-messages"—are discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

When giving feedback, say Charles Jung and associates (1973), it is useful to describe observed behaviors, as well as the reactions they caused. They offer these guidelines: the receiver should be ready to receive feedback; comments should describe, rather than interpret; feedback should focus on recent events or actions that can be changed, but should not be used to try to force people to change.

One especially important kind of feedback for administrators is letting staff members know how well they are doing their jobs. Effective school leaders give plenty of timely positive feedback. They give negative feedback privately, without anger or personal attack, and they accept criticism without becoming defensive.

*Paraphrasing.* Charles Jung and his colleagues stress that the real purpose of paraphrasing is not to clarify what the other person actually meant, but to show what it meant to you. This may mean restating the original statement in more specific terms, using an example, or restating it in more general terms.

*Perception Checking.* Perception checking is an effort to understand the feelings behind the words. One method is simply to describe your impressions of another person's feelings at a given time, avoiding any expression of approval or disapproval.

*Describing Behavior.* Useful behavior description, according to Jung and his associates, reports specific, observable actions without value judgments, and without making accusations or generalizations about motives, attitudes, or personality traits. "You've disagreed with almost everything he's said" is preferable to "You're being stubborn."

**What's a Nonthreatening Method of Requesting Behavior Change?**

"I"-messages reflect one's own views and rely on description rather than criticism, blame, or prescription. The message is less likely to prompt defensive reactions and more likely to be heard by the re-



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cipient. One form of "I"-message includes three elements: (1) the problem or situation, (2) your feelings about the issue, and (3) the reason for the concern. For example, "When you miss staff meetings, I get concerned that we're making plans without your input."

For expressing feelings, Jung and colleagues recommend a simpler form. You can refer directly to feelings ("I'm angry"), use similes, ("I feel like a fish out of water"), or describe what you'd like to do ("I'd like to leave the room now").

**How Can Individuals Improve the Nonverbal Components of Their Communications?**

Whether you're communicating with one person or a group, nonverbal messages play an important role. Kristen Amundson (1993) notes that one study found 93 percent of a message is sent nonverbally, and only 7 percent through what is said. Doreen S. Geddes (1995) offers the following pointers:

- *Body orientation.* To indicate you like and respect people, face them when interacting.
- *Posture.* Good posture is associated with confidence and enthusiasm. It indicates our degree of tenseness or relaxation. Observing the posture of others provides clues to their feelings.
- *Facial expression.* Notice facial expressions. Some people mask emotions by not using facial expression; others exaggerate facial expression to belie their real feelings. If you sense contradictions in verbal and nonverbal messages, gently probe deeper.
- *Eye contact.* Frequent eye contact communicates interest and confidence. Avoidance communicates the opposite.
- *Use of space.* The less distance, the more intimate and informal the relationship. Staying behind your desk when someone comes to visit gives the impression that you are unapproachable.
- *Personal appearance.* People tend to show more respect and respond more positively to individuals who are are well-dressed, but not overdressed.

**How Can School Leaders Enhance Interpersonal Relationships with Colleagues and Constituents?**

Vision, humor, accessibility, team-building skills, and genuine praise all can help to create a positive emotional climate.

*Vision.* Allan Vann (1994) notes that "principals earn staff respect by articulating a clear vision of their school's mission, and working collegially to accomplish agreed-on goals and objectives." This process should begin before school starts, and be reinforced throughout the school year.

*Removing Barriers.* Communication barriers can deplete team energy and isolate individuals who may then proceed on the basis of faulty assumptions. Meetings and various inhouse communiqués, combined with private discussions, can remove interpersonal barriers before they become larger problems.

*Giving Praise.* Communication experts recommend using sincere praise whenever possible to create a more constructive atmosphere. An indirect way of giving praise is through telling others stories about people at your school who are doing remarkable things.

*Being Accessible.* It is important to be available and welcome personal contact with others. Informal meetings are as important as formal ones. Ask people about their families and call them by their first names. An administrator who takes the time to get to know the staff will be able to identify, develop, and make best use of each staff member's capabilities.

*Building Teamwork.* When schools move toward site-based management, open communication becomes even more essential. A sense of teamwork can be nurtured through an earnest effort to help each staff member achieve his or her potential.

*Using Humor.* Various researchers indicate humor is the seventh sense necessary for effective school leadership. Results of a study by Patricia Pierson and Paul Bredeson (1993) suggest that principals use humor for four major purposes: (1) creating and improving school climate; (2) relating to teachers the principal's understanding of the complexities and demands of their professional worklife; (3) breaking down the rigidity of bureaucratic structures by humanizing and personalizing interpersonal communications; and (4) when appropriate, delivering sanctions and other necessary unpleasantries.

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